

Zentrum für Europäische Integrationsforschung  
Center for European Integration Studies  
Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität Bonn



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## Western Balkans and the European Union

Discussion Paper

C258  
2020



Rheinische  
Friedrich-Wilhelms-  
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ISSN 1435-3288

ISBN 978-3-946195-00-9

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*Ermir I. Hajdini*

## **Albania's Path to the EU**

*“Caesar’s spouse not only has to be honest but also has to show that she is honest”*

*Anonymous*

### ***Introduction***

The European Union (EU) cannot just see itself as a global player<sup>1</sup> but has to show that it is one. Regional integration is a crucial test for the EU’s credibility of becoming a global player and the Western Balkan enlargement process is a great example. Put simply, any economic advantageous position has to be associated by political processes. Decisiveness is an attribute of leadership and the EU cannot be the “least common denominator” any more. The European Union took the pledge to enlarge at the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, where Albania, as well as the other countries of the Western Balkan region were determined as potential candidates for EU-membership. The EU’s decision can be associated with the growing stability throughout the region over the past years as well as the geopolitical importance of the region for the EU.

Almost 15 years have passed since the Summit and the challenges have grown not only for the Western Balkan region, but also for the European Union. The credibility of the enlargement process – a crucial instrument of EU foreign policy – has lost its momentum. However, the “Berlin Process”, the initiative aimed at revitalizing the multilateral ties between the Western Balkans and EU Member States

1 Online at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/economy/20180703\\_STO\\_07132/the-eu-s-position-in-world-trade-in-figures-infographic](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/economy/20180703_STO_07132/the-eu-s-position-in-world-trade-in-figures-infographic).

*Internet resources, last date of access: October 24, 2019.*

is showing increased efforts on the side of the EU. Further, since February 2018 Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, The Republic of Northern Macedonia and Kosovo were given a renewed European perspective with accession negotiations moving forward. In the words of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, it is “merit-based, each under different conditions and at its own pace, but with a strong commitment on the part of the EU to make this goal credible and finally become true.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the Union’s general reluctance towards further enlargement per se, with the return of geopolitics in the old continent and emergence of transnational security threats, the region has entered into an uncertain phase, characterized by a general resistance to democratic reform processes, lack of trust and other potential partnerships forming (e.g. Turkey, Russia, China and the Gulf Countries). The Union’s general political climate does not allow pushing the enlargement process. This is also based on the resurgence of populist movements and nationalism. Even though the Western Balkans in principle are not yet ready to become Member States, the need to keep them “anchored” to the EU goes beyond particular political parties or Member States’ interests and is firmly linked to the overall security and stability of the European continent.

As such the accession negotiations should be seen as a promising development for a region that needs to leave behind unrestrained conflicts, cycles of external and internal oppression, dysfunctional state structures, underdevelopment, as well as an impoverished citizenry and issues of depopulation. However, the new European perspective is only the beginning of a long and challenging task for the region. For years, the EU has been involved in a variety of interventions within the WB with mixed results. Past failures can be

2 Speech by High Representative/ Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament Plenary Session on the Western Balkan Strategy, online at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/39451/Speechhigh-representativevic%20e-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliamentplenary\\_en](http://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/39451/Speechhigh-representativevic%20e-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliamentplenary_en).

## Albania's Path to EU

primarily found with governance structures, which prevented essential reforms from being implemented at the national level. Questions that need to be addressed include:

- 1) What the EU is “missing” if the EU family is not complete?
- 2) What are the short-term expectations of Albania vis à vis the EU?

Here, the “Berlin Process” is worth mentioning<sup>3</sup> – the brain child of Chancellor Angela Merkel is a cooperation platform designed to advance the Western Balkan states on their way to the European Union. The “Berlin Process” since its conceptualization in 2014 is becoming popular at the midst of Member States of the EU. The foundation of the initiative is the economic cooperation with emphasis given to the concept of regional economic cooperation – regional free trade area and infrastructure issues.

Regional cooperation in the Western Balkans has recently entered a new stage of development, after the initial external (EU) driven phase. Originally, cooperation was conceived of secondary importance with respect to other EU priorities for the region i.e. rule of law, security, etc. As such, the entry into force of the Stabilization and Association Agreements between the EU and the Western Balkan countries sanctioned the obligation for them to cooperate with each other in respect of the principle of good neighborly relations. It is worth mentioning that the agreement reached within the framework of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), which lowered the roaming tariffs<sup>4</sup> throughout the Western Balkan states, showed that the region can work together and produce good results for its citizens.

3 Online at: <https://berlinprocess.info/>.

4 Online at: <https://www.rcc.int/news/551/roaming-prices-dramatically-drop-across-western-balkans-speak-more-surf-more-pay-less>.

## ***EU: The Need to reinvent itself***

The current state of affairs in the EU is not the most favorable or proactive in regards to enlargement policy. Following the feelings of “enlargement fatigue” of the Juncker’s Commission and the “migration crisis” and related issues along the Balkan route, the general perception in the region was one of increased insecurity and EU disengagement in the region. The challenges of the enlargement process are multifaceted and are deep-rooted, on the EU level and the national/ regional level:

a) The EU level

- Tensions between Member States and EU leadership (the Institutions)
- EU financial sustains

b) National/ regional level

- Weak institutions
- Wide spread corruption
- Economic fatigue
- Profit driven political elite
- Yet to be impartial/ professional bureaucracy...etc.

However, some of the challenges confronting the Western Balkans are the same challenges faced by the EU, including the fight against transnational organized crime, the management of migration flows, ensuring energy security or the security of citizens in general. Today’s threats do not respect national borders. It is not idealism that leads populations in Serbia or Albania to seek to bind themselves with other Europeans. It is realism and a recognition of mutual interests. Almost one year ago, High Representative/ Vice-President Federica Mogherini presented, and EU Heads of State and Government endorsed, the EU Global Strategy. The Global Strategy recognizes that citizens want a stronger, more secure Europe, yet it also recognizes that the countries of Europe do not have the strength or resources to seize the opportunities or address the threats of the 21st century alone.

### ***Albania's expectations***

“The European Union’s integration is a major national objective” – this is a strategic prerogative familiar to Albanians for almost 30 years now.<sup>5</sup> As the matter of fact, Albanians have been and still are among the EU enthusiast and fierce supporters of the integration process.

In order to get some perspective, the country, nowadays, is most famous for its justice sector reform – most often referred “vetting process”. This specific reform is unique as it has the blessing and support of European Union<sup>6</sup> and the United States, the monitoring body of such reform is chaired by an EU official, and its objective is very much desired by the Albanian society at large.

Based on the latest statement of Genoveva Ruíz Calavera – Chairwoman of the International Monitoring Operation for the “vetting process” as well as Director for the Western Balkans at the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations – “...the reform is well on its way...” but still to see some hard cases brought up to courts, the country public opinion is craving for this. Thus achieving results on this – hampering the wide spread corruption – is a clear expectation of Albanians.

Opening negotiations are expected to last eight to ten years, and during this time, structural reforms need to take place, including in Digital Integration and mobility (infrastructure). Albania still has a lot of work ahead in various fields with the support of the EU.<sup>7</sup>

5 INSTAT of Albania (2010), Population of Albania on 1 January 2018 (in Albanian), Institute of Statistics of Albania.

6 Online at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/albania/20144/most-frequently-asked-questions-international-monitoring-operation\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/albania/20144/most-frequently-asked-questions-international-monitoring-operation_en).

7 Alix Culbertson, Albania and Bosnia fail to impress at EU membership meeting over democratic value concerns, in: Express Newspapers Ltd., UK, 01.02.2017.

## **Conclusion**

In the era of austerity of anti-multilateralism and populist nationalism, this is no time to have a European Union on the block unsure about its future. Inevitably the Western Balkan's Region vis à vis Albania's integration to the EU is a safe bet. The timeline of integration will however depend on the political circumstances faced by the EU and the credibility of the structural reforms made by Albania.

This essay argued in favor of a stronger and more decisive EU policy over individual Member's State policies. Of course, the Western Balkan Region presents – as explained above – a huge challenge. On the other hand, that challenge represents an indispensable investment opportunity for the EU, with attributes both (geo) political and economic.

The “Berlin Process” is not only a testimony to the “EU is strong here” but may also serve as a mean to “calcify” a coalition of willingness among its Member States. Albania is determined to continue the EU path and its citizens are very much in favor of the EU enlargement. These two crucial issues, especially as nationalistic elements are on the rise, must be important for the EU and must count for:

- A fully functional rule of law state;
- Structural Reforms.

These are what Albanians expect from EU and vice versa, a paradox that EU must tackle.

*Nikola Jokić*

## **Bosnia and Herzegovina on the EU Path – Gains and Expectations**

### ***Introduction***

At the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, the European Union (EU) confirmed its determination to continue the process of enlargement by confirming membership perspectives for the countries of the Western Balkans. This included, including Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) which, during the 1990s, experienced the most tragic war on European soil after World War II. However, with each round of enlargement, parties in the process, although they have fulfilled formal conditions, have developed different expectations from each other. As far as the EU or member states are concerned, the question that arises is related to the actual gains for the EU from having additional member states. On the other hand, people in accession countries have developed certain expectations of the EU during the accession process. Having this in mind, this paper discusses the case of BiH's accession taking into account the following two questions: What expectations has BiH developed towards the EU during the accession process and what can the membership of BiH in the EU bring to the EU?

### ***Expectations of BiH towards the EU***

The EU became engaged in the crisis in Yugoslavia in the beginning of the 1990s with the aim of preventing the escalation of the conflict. At the beginning of the crisis, many people in BiH believed that Europe would not permit a war to occur on its doorstep. Unfortunately, the EU was not prepared to deal with such a crisis and

the Balkans sunk into a series of wars. The bloodiest of which happened in BiH, taking around 100.000 lives<sup>1</sup> and leaving the country in ruins. People's hopes and beliefs that Europe would prevent such tragedy vanished in the whirlwind of the war.

However, following the end of the war the EU has taken the leading role in reconstruction, stabilization and development of BiH. Since the EU confirmed a membership perspective, BiH has implemented many reforms in order to comply with the EU criteria. In the meantime, the EU has continued to support BiH, which can be seen best in the fact that the EU is the largest donor in BiH.<sup>2</sup> Despite the EU's support, BiH lags behind other Western Balkans countries on its path toward the EU. There are various reasons behind the slow progress that can be attributed to local actors, but at the same time, there are reasons for it on the side of the EU as well. In this regard, the EU's reluctance for further enlargement has effected the progress BiH has made towards accession to the EU.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously with the increase in reluctance within the EU, stagnation in reforms in BiH has become more than obvious. This confirms the EU's transformative power. However, the transformative power of the EU has limited impact due to reluctance on the EU side for further enlargement. The EU assistance to BiH in forms of donor aid as well as several initiatives to move the country closer to the EU has failed to deliver expected results due to a lack of a credible perspective of membership. The lack of clear timeline to membership has contributed to the overall stagnation of the country. Apart from the EU, there are several other power centers involved in BiH with the

1 United Nations, UN News, online at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/08/1017272>.

2 Donor Mapping Report 2017, Ministry of Finance and Treasury of BiH, pp 8, online at: [http://www.donormapping.ba/pdf/DMR\\_2017\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.donormapping.ba/pdf/DMR_2017_ENG.pdf).

3 Daria Sito-Sucic, Short-sighted policies stall Balkans' integration into EU: Erdogan, Reuters, 24.10.2019, online at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-bosnia-southeasteurope-forum/short-sighted-policies-stall-balkans-integration-into-eu-erdogan-idUSKCN1U41KR>.

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aim to support peace implementation.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that the responsibility for the overall progress of the country remains with local actors. However, the role of external actors in the reform process in BiH, as well as overall progress toward EU membership, must not be underestimated. The rise of the impact of different power centers in BiH is the result of Europe's reluctance to admit BiH under its roof. Despite these influences, BiH belongs to Europe and that is why the transformative power of the EU remains. At same time, BiH has expected a greater presence from the EU in order to resist these different influences.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that political leaders of different communities in BiH are divided on many issues. The most recent example is a lack of an agreement with regard to forming a new government on the state level due to a division over the issue of BiH's accession to NATO.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the involvement of different power centers in BiH creates further division among political leaders due to different historical reasons and relations between these power centers and different communities in BiH.

However, all domestic actors welcome the EU's presence and the EU path for BiH is a policy which enjoys broad support in BiH. Furthermore, according to the most recent public opinion poll, 76 % of people would vote yes for BiH's entry into the EU.<sup>6</sup> Relating to this, the expectations of people in BiH in terms of the EU are extremely high. Accession of BiH to the EU is primarily seen as a guaranty of peace and stability and an insurance that events from the recent history will not to be repeated. People in BiH are aware of this

4 See Office of the High Representative, Peace Implementation Council, online at: [http://www.ohr.int/?page\\_id=1220](http://www.ohr.int/?page_id=1220).

5 Emma Beswick, Why is Bosnia still without a government 10 months after elections? Euronews, 24.10.2019, online at: <https://www.euronews.com/2019/08/21/why-is-bosnia-still-without-a-government-10-months-after-elections-euronews-answers>.

6 Directorate for European Integration, Opinion poll: Citizen's opinion on EU membership and EU integration process, April 2019, online at: [http://www.dei.gov.ba/dei/media\\_servis/istrazivanje/default.aspx?id=1905&langTag=en-US&template\\_id=120&pageIndex=1](http://www.dei.gov.ba/dei/media_servis/istrazivanje/default.aspx?id=1905&langTag=en-US&template_id=120&pageIndex=1).

fact and that is why most of them consider, “belief that membership guarantees lasting peace and political stability”, as the most common reason for supporting BiH membership in the EU.<sup>7</sup>

On the other side, the EU proudly promotes itself as a “soft power” and emphasizes diversity. People of Europe, “united in diversity”, have come together to work for peace and prosperity.<sup>8</sup> Such diversity can be observed from various perspectives, e.g. diversity of culture or language, but also diverse systems of government, from constitutional monarchies, federal republics to centralized republics or division of powers between different levels of governments. Deployment of these diversities in line with the principles of “soft power” used in a consistent manner by the EU’s would definitely unblock many processes in BiH. In this way, the EU would fulfil the expectations of people in BiH by helping them find their place under the EU roof.

### ***Another face of Bosnia and Herzegovina***

One of the main characteristics of BiH is its huge ethnic and religious diversity. Namely, BiH is a place where four major religious and many ethnic groups have coexisted throughout the history. It has been a home to Catholics, Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Judaism for centuries. In many cities in BiH, including the capital, Sarajevo, several centuries-old churches and mosques were built next to each other. Today, BiH consists of three constituent ethnic groups, Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Apart from them, BiH is home to many other ethnic groups. All these diversities make BiH a unique place on the European map, a place where the East and the West meet. In spite of all this diversity, different ethnic groups in BiH have one thing in common and that is European identity. Such diversity in a relatively small space like Bosnia could seem problematic due to the tragic

7 Directorate for European Integration, Opinion poll: Citizen’s opinion on EU membership and EU integration process, April 2019, pp 8.

8 European Union, The EU motto, online at: [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/symbols/motto_en).

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recent historical events during which many war crimes were committed. However, there is another side of BiH, which reflects the real “face” of the people in BiH which was shown many times in the past, through heroic acts of the people in BiH who risked their lives during dark episodes of Bosnian history. With their heroic acts, these people stood against the most brutal terror being done to their fellow citizens whose lives were threatened only because of their ethnic or religious background. In saving their fellow citizens, these heroes made it clear that the most horrible acts against human rights are not in line with their culture and beliefs.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning one of the most prominent examples in the recent history, which relates to Srđan Aleksić. At the peak of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s, Srđan Aleksić lost his life while defending his neighbor who was attacked because of his ethnicity.<sup>9</sup> Along from this example, there are many similar cases in the last war among different ethnic groups, in which people saved “others”, whose lives were threatened just because of their ethnicity.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, there were many similar cases during World War II. The best testimony for these heroic acts is that the people from BiH were awarded with “Righteous Among the Nations” award by Yad Vashem – The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre.<sup>11</sup> Apart from saving the lives of others, people in BiH risked their own lives to save cultural heritage artifacts during World War II.

One such example is the Sarajevo Haggadah, a valuable manuscript from the 14th century of great emotional significance for the Jewish community. The Sarajevo Haggadah has survived dark episodes

9 Human Rights House Foundation, Srdjan Aleksic posthumously awarded, online at: <https://humanrightshouse.org/articles/srdjan-aleksic-posthumously-awarded/>.

10 See: Story about a Man who saved 45 Serbian Civilians only 3 Days after His Family was burned, Sarajevo Times, online at: <https://www.sarajevotimes.com/story-man-saved-45-serbian-civilians-3-days-family-burned/>.

11 Yad Vashem, World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Names of Righteous by Country, online at: <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/statistics.html>.

thanks to the courage of individuals who risked their lives regardless of their own religious beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Today, the manuscript is exhibited in the National Museum in Sarajevo and represents valuable piece of BiH cultural heritage.

However, let us forget for a moment the dark periods of BiH history and have a look at some bright episodes. Namely, a mixture of different cultures has proven to be a great potential for attracting the attention of international circles in a positive manner. For example, soon after the country came under Austro-Hungarian rule, BiH recorded great results in the field of technological innovation. Namely, Sarajevo was among the first European cities, to introduce the electric tram.<sup>13</sup> During the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, BiH developed significant economic relations with the countries of the European Community. In this regard, it is worth remembering that several famous European brands have had their factories in BiH.<sup>14</sup>

One of the brightest moments in which the diversity of BiH came to the fore was recorded in 1984. Sarajevo especially, as a host of the XIV Olympic Winter Games was the focus of an international audience. The ambitious idea to host one of the most prestigious sporting events was a mixture of creativity and enthusiasm of the people in BiH. Although it seemed almost impossible to win the nomination to host the games, against cities with much more developed facilities and a longer history in winter sports, Sarajevo won. This event was significant as not a single national team boycotted the games, as was the case with several other Olympic

12 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, France and the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina bring Sarajevo Haggadah close to the public, online at: [http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/unesco\\_france\\_and\\_the\\_national\\_museum\\_of\\_bosnia\\_and\\_herzegovina/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/unesco_france_and_the_national_museum_of_bosnia_and_herzegovina/).

13 Emily Gunzburger Makaš, Tanja Damljanović Conley, *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning in Central and Southeastern Europe*, Routledge, 2010 pp 243.

14 VOLKSWAGEN, *Vergessen und verzeihen*, online at: <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-7971702.html>.

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games during the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> In the tense atmosphere of the Cold War, this was a great achievement and Sarajevo showed that it could bridge divided nations in Europe.

After the '90s war, the city of Sarajevo was divided into two cities, Sarajevo and East Sarajevo. However, the “flame of peace” returned to both cities for the first time as a result of common efforts to shine again on the international stage. Namely, Sarajevo and East Sarajevo were hosts to the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF) in 2019.<sup>16</sup>

During the 1980's BiH established itself as a cultural center of the former Yugoslavia, especially in the field of music and films. One of the most prominent subcultural movements in the former Yugoslavia, the “New Primitives” was created during this time as a response to socio-economic developments in the former Yugoslavia. Simultaneously, as in the music scene, cinematography was flourishing and today one of the most prominent film festivals in South Eastern Europe takes place in Bosnia – Sarajevo Film Festival.<sup>17</sup> Everything mentioned here, proves the achievements resulting from huge diversity. Additionally, if looked at from an historical perspective, these diversities in BiH have shown that their greatest potential is reached when they were a part of larger, grandiose projects. In this regard, BiH's membership in the EU could be beneficial for both sides.

15 John Nauright, Charles Parrish, *Sports Around the World: History, Culture, and Practice*, Jørn Hansen, Olympic Winter Games of 1984 (Sarajevo), pp 406.

16 European Youth Olympic Festival, online at: <https://eyof2019.net/en/stranica.php?idstranica=8>.

17 European Commission, Film Forum Sarajevo looks at how to boost the presence of European films in South-Eastern Europe, online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/film-forum-sarajevo-looks-how-boost-presence-european-films-south-eastern-europe>.

## ***Conclusion***

Diversity in BiH has proven its potential many times through numerous bright episodes in history. The accession of BiH to the EU should not only be observed as an accession of one more member but as a gain in the form of huge potential to contribute to common European interests.

On the other side, the people in BiH expect more support from Europe in BiH in order to overcome their fears from the recent past and find their place under the roof of the EU. Not so long time ago they believed that Europe would not let them down, but Europe was not prepared at the time to meet their longings and expectations. In spite of that, people in BiH still believe in Europe and hope that they will not be let down again.

*Teodora Ladić*

## **Western Balkans and the EU – Montenegro's View**

### ***1. What is the EU missing if we do not complete the EU family by bringing Montenegro into the EU?***

The European Council adopted the Thessaloniki agenda for Western Balkans in 2003, which introduced a whole set of new criteria and cooperation frameworks between the European Union (EU) and the Western Balkan six countries (WB6). Montenegro officially started the negotiation process with the EU in 2012, in a new enlargement process with a vast complex of accession criteria. Now, seven years of negotiations later, 32 out of 33 negotiation chapters have been opened and only three are provisionally closed. This year's European Commission Report<sup>1</sup> provides an assessment of the progress made, recognizing results made during the reporting period in many fields. Currently, Montenegro is waiting on the green light to open the last Chapter 8 – competition policy, for obtaining closing benchmarks for Chapters 23 and 24 and to temporarily close several chapters that have attained internal readiness. Even though, Montenegro has harmonized its institutional and legislative framework with the EU, the implementation still represents the most demanding phase of the accession process with the EU. There is still a lot of work ahead of Montenegro and it is important that the perspective of membership exists, as the reform process in Montenegro would not continue in this manner if the goal of EU membership had not been the driving force. Nevertheless, we cannot influence the processes

1 European Commission, Staff Working document, Montenegro 2019 report, Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions 2019, Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, 29 May 2019.

within the Union, but what we can do – is to continue with our reform activities and direct all capacities towards improving conditions in the Montenegrin society, because in the end the reform process is conducted for us, not the EU.

On the other hand, the EU is currently in a phase of consolidation, the elections for European Parliament have passed surprisingly well, in that euro-skeptic parties acquired fewer seats than expected. However, the fragmentation among pro-European parties is higher than ever before. Moreover, the Brexit situation is still an unresolved matter, with numerous international issues where the EU has no united stance. Hence, taking all of this into consideration the European Union needs to make use of its most successful policy – enlargement policy, as the backbone of unity, prosperity and as a tool for sharing the unprecedented European peace mission throughout diverse regions of Europe.

Throughout history, Montenegro has shown incredible signs of stability in the region and has supported common European values. The EU would certainly miss a chance to import stability and would create enormous negative effects in the whole region if it closes the door to further enlargement, and which in the end, would return to as boomerang. It is clear that the EU has doubts about accepting new member states, i.e. Montenegro, as we can see in the recent survey conducted by Eurobarometer<sup>2</sup> which shows that the majority of the EU member states and their citizens have a low level of support for the enlargement process at this time. This would imply that the EU's soft power in the enlargement process is losing value and it is not attaining its prior purpose, which in the end would directly affect the EU's ability to export stability, prosperity and security and certainly would question its role in the international sphere. Hence, the Balkan Peninsula remains a stumbling stone for the European Union; nevertheless, it is the moment to learn from previous mistakes. Montenegro is a small country in land size, population and overall economy, mere entrance into the European family would not statistically change much at the Union level.

2 European Commission, Eurobarometer, Public opinion, online at: <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm#p=1&instruments=SPECIAL>.

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Moreover, taking into consideration the two major issues within accession negotiations with the EU, organized crime and corruption, under so called “balance clause” Chapters 23 and 24, in the end it would not threaten core European values. On the contrary, by entering the EU, Montenegro would have greater access to available internal mechanisms for timely and concrete action towards these issues. Hence, looking at this from a negative side, the EU has no reason to not welcome Montenegro as the next member state, considering the fact that many other EU countries still struggle with similar issues that can only be resolved with joint cooperation and support. The protracted enlargement process for the WB6 and especially for Montenegro has also affected the quality and speed of political, economic and legal reforms, which in the end have led to measurable democratic backsliding and ignorance amongst the political elite for the implementation of measures adopted through the negotiation process with the EU. This, consequently, can introduce interest from new global powers in this historically and geostrategically important European region. The influence of Russia, China and Turkey in Montenegro is visible through subversive actions or investments which could have significant repercussions on the European Union.<sup>3</sup>

“Brussels faces the dilemma of accommodating different positions in its enlargement plans. Some credible commitment to the Western Balkans is necessary to strengthen the attractiveness of the European model, deal with external influences and, importantly, show the EU's vitality after Brexit. The UK's departure will have an impact on the EU's redefinition of its global role and engagement with the Western Balkans is one of the ways to demonstrate Brussels' willingness to remain a relevant actor. Enlargement remains a powerful mechanism in the EU's foreign-policy toolbox. It allows the bloc to have considerable leverage over its neighborhood if the prospect of joining is credible. As seen with the recent efforts, the EU is aware of the Western Balkans' importance and tries to make use of its tools to address regional concerns, mostly over security.”<sup>4</sup>

3 Alex Eror, Who Would Really Benefit From a Freeze on EU Enlargement in the Balkans? World politics review, July 2019, online at: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28037/who-would-really-benefit-from-a-freeze-on-eu-enlargement-in-the-balkans>.

4 Anna Nadibaidze, Can EU enlargement in the western Balkans revive? Social Europe, January 2019, online at: <https://www.socialeurope.eu/eu-enlargement-western-balkans>.

Hence, the EU would certainly affect its leading role in the world as a soft change maker and role model for conduct if it were not to accept Montenegro or other WB countries into the family of the EU member states. This also, indirectly explains what the EU would miss if it fails to bring Montenegro into the EU family.

Moreover, the EU values of peace, democracy, freedom, respect for human rights and prosperity are the backbone of the unprecedented supranational system, which brings diverse countries and citizens under one united umbrella. This mission is not selective and it is intended to be expanded until the whole European continent is circled, thus closing the European doors to the WB6 would undermine the credibility of the whole European project.

Montenegro is a country of unique harmony on the Balkan Peninsula when it comes to diverse nationalities, culture and religion. It has been home to many refugees during the '90s wars and it has shown persistence on the path towards Europeanization in the most difficult times. Moreover, throughout history, this small country, has given a significant contribution during two world wars, by always being on the right side of history. Finally, in the enlargement process it has shown good results in many fields, especially when it comes to good neighborhood relations, one of the new accession preconditions. Still, there is a lot of work ahead in the most sensitive areas for Montenegrin society, however, in my opinion, the European Union and Montenegro would gain much more if Montenegro joins the Union sooner rather than later. Additionally, Montenegro has shown a high level of solidarity and responsibility towards the EU and its member states in times of crisis, i.e. the migrant crisis and in international peacekeeping missions. It has proven its awareness of the necessity to respect the European values and to contribute to the attainment of EU objectives.

“Advancing the EU-Western Balkans integration process could play an important role for the EU within ongoing efforts to improve its own resilience. This would help the Union to better define its relationship with an increasingly complex external environment. Moreover, it would not only be an investment in stability and security in Europe, but it would also be economically beneficial for both the Balkans and the entire EU. It is clear that any increase in the region’s living standards would positively contribute to the wealth of the Union. The successful

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integration of the Western Balkans would represent an important step forward in the process of the territorialisation of the EU.”<sup>5</sup>

In the end, it is important that the newly appointed European Commission and its President Ursula von der Leyen, do not repeat the mistake of the predecessor Jean-Claude Juncker when he proclaimed, at the beginning of his mandate, that no enlargement will happen during his term. This new institutional structure of the EU must give new impetus to consolidation within the Union; at the same time leaving the door wide open for potential new member states in the Balkan region. Thus, Western Balkan countries will never be the same as many Western European countries, but in the end, the motto “united in diversity” certainly explains why it is important to have us all on board.

### ***2. What do you and Montenegro expect from the EU in the next few years?***

The European integration process for Montenegro started in 2007 after the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU. Thus, calculating from this time, it is twelve years of conducting a plethora of reforms, harmonization with EU rules and following strict and measurable criteria. However, the integration process itself with the EU is Montenegro's wisest choice and it is a voluntary decision for the well-being, security and prosperity of Montenegrin citizens. In that respect it is impossible to cherry pick and choose only benefits of the process, but to accept the whole package meaning time-consuming processes, many changes and never-ending conditionality. It is certain that Montenegro and other Western Balkan countries would not make the advancements as they have done until this point, if the EU was not seen as the driving force and paradigm on the other side of the process. The European Union has set a path in front of us many years ago and it is still providing Montenegro strong support in diverse manners to become a better place for its citizens. However, we still naturally expect more from the EU in the up-coming years especially taking into

5 Matteo Bonomi, *The EU and the Western Balkans: A Region of Opportunities, not only of Risks*, January 2019, online at: <http://greater-europe.org/archives/6337>.

consideration certain periods of crisis, in the EU and worldwide, that have eclipsed the enlargement agenda and led to significant fatigue among member states. This has prevented the EU to address the issues in the WB6 concretely. In the end, we must ask ourselves what do we expect from us and not only from the EU, because it is up to Montenegro to conduct reforms in order to attain a certain level of development, i.e. the mere membership is not goal by itself, but the goal is or at least it should be the transformation of our society in terms of economic wealth, respect for human rights, strong institutions, rule of law and overall high living standards. We should understand that the expectations must be directed towards our institutions and people in terms that recognize that the reform process is only for us and that it is more important to make changes in our society than to formally become member of the EU. On the other hand, the EU has shown that it has opened eyes and opinion as to future of enlargement of the Union by reserving 46 seats in the European Parliament for the newcomers after Great Britain leaves. This is the most direct sign of an intention to show absorption capacity and readiness to accept Montenegro and other accession candidates. Certainly, Montenegro is seen as the first next EU member state and it is considered a frontrunner in the European integration process; 2025 has been set as the target year, nevertheless it can be prolonged if certain measurable results are not met.

“Following the decision (The new rules that were formally adopted by EU leaders at their summit in Brussels on 28-29 June will come into force in time for the European elections to be held on 23-26 May in 2019.), 27 of the UK's 73 seats will be redistributed to other countries, while the remaining 46 seats will be kept for future enlargements. This means the number of MEPs to be elected will be 705.”<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the European Parliament elections have passed and left positive and pro-European forces in power, which are supportive of the enlargement process. At the same time, the level of fragmentation is

6 The European Parliament announcement, EU elections: how many MEPs will each country get in 2019?, 2018, online at: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20180126STO94114/eu-elections-how-many-meps-will-each-country-get-in-2019>; and The European Council Decision establishing the composition of the European Parliament, June 2018, online at: <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7-2018-REV-1/en/pdf>.

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higher than it has ever been in the Parliament, leaving strong doubts as to the smoothness of the decision-making process and achieving consensus on the accession process.

Furthermore, the EU commitment to the enlargement agenda is also embodied in the pre-accession assistance support that each EU candidate country receives for conducting economic, political and social reforms within the European integration process. The next funding cycle under the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 has incorporated significant resources for the IPA funds and increased them by 13%<sup>7</sup> compared to previous financial cycles, making space to fulfil expectations in the short-term strategy of the Montenegrin accession process with the EU. The increase of financial support from the EU is a positive sign, in that more resources will be available to boost reforms and support the most difficult challenges within specific negotiating chapters. On the other hand, this also means that the Montenegrin expectations, embodied in the midterm strategy (date for the accession confirmed) will not be met, i.e. increasing financial support under IPA funds strongly suggests the continuation of the Montenegrin candidate status as a negotiating country without signs of the end of the long-lasting accession process. According to the recent European Commission Progress Report for Montenegro there was neither suggestion for the opening the last unopened Chapter 8 – competition policy, nor recommendations to close those chapters that have achieved internal readiness.

The next few years will be crucial for the Montenegrin accession process and it is necessary to consider the fact that, now more than ever, there will be no shortcuts towards full-fledged membership, as the newly elected members in the EU institutions will certainly put more emphasis on internal consolidation than on enlargement policy. This indicates that the European Commission will be stricter as to the results it wants to see from the Montenegro and other WB countries in reform processes. Hence, taking this into consideration, we must be prepared to expect nothing more or less than

7 European Commission, The EU budget for the future, June 2018, online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-may2018-pre-accession-assistance\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/budget-may2018-pre-accession-assistance_en.pdf).

the EU has provided to us so far. More importantly, Montenegro has to think in farsighted terms and prepare for the future, i.e. it has to set clear plan for the years up to 2025 (as targeted year of accession). Thus, it needs to set achievable and measurable milestones in terms of the number of chapters that need to be closed, or fulfilling benchmarks for chapter 23 and 24, on which whole process depends. In this way, Montenegro must take the process into its hands.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, EU enlargement policy is one of the most successful policies, which has really led to positive changes in many countries. However, it is clear that the current enlargement set-up has not resulted in the greatest progress in the Western Balkan region. If the EU wants to maintain its credibility and prevent other international actors from taking up firm positions in this region, it has to meet the expectations of these countries; in the same manner it expects from them to achieve certain accession conditions.<sup>9</sup>

“The Western Balkans are part of Europe: we share the same history, the same geography, the same cultural heritage and the same opportunities and challenges today and in the future. We are each other’s destiny. So let there be no doubt that the place of the Western Balkans is inside the European Union.”<sup>10</sup>

In the end, without any doubt the EU and Montenegro share at least two things in common, that is history and geography, with other mentioned aspects taken into consideration – it is certain that expectations are the same when it comes to Montenegro’s fully fledged membership in the Union.

8 Gordana Djurovic, Interview, Portal Analitika, May 2019, online at: <https://portalanalitika.me/clanak/335457/durovic-nakon-izbora-za-evropski-parlament-nema-precica-za-zemlje-kanididate>.

9 Dusko Lopandic, Brexit and the Future of the EU Enlargement, European Policy Center, April 2017, online at: <https://cep.org.rs/en/blogs/brexit-and-the-future-of-eu-enlargement/>.

10 European Commission, Speech by Commissioner Johannes Hahn at the Western Balkans Summit, Poznań 2019, online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/hahn/announcements/speech-commissioner-johannes-hahn-western-balkans-summit-poznan-2019\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2014-2019/hahn/announcements/speech-commissioner-johannes-hahn-western-balkans-summit-poznan-2019_en).

*Ksenija Milenković*

## **The European Integration of Serbia in the Framework of the EU's (un)successful Strategy for the Western Balkans**

The European perspective for the so-called Western Balkan region was initially designed in the late nineties of the 20th century, with the main aim of stabilizing a turbulent region which remained affected by conflicts, divisions and ethnic and religious partitions. The “Stabilization and Association” process was launched with the goal of offering the perspective of European Union membership to the region, as well as to contribute to peace and stability and encourage regional cooperation and reconciliation. The confirmation of the EU's political commitment towards enlargement in the region came at the EU-Western Balkan summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, where all regional partners were promised an EU future, upon the fulfilment of the membership criteria. So far the only country which has joined the EU under the Stabilization and Association process was Croatia in 2013 after six years of accession negotiations.

The perspective currently seems gloomy for the rest of the region. Although the enlargement process has been kept alive and on the agenda of the EU, the political commitment of the EU leaders is highly questionable. Since the so-called “big bang” enlargement of 2004, the enthusiasm for the process has continuously declined and the reasons for that trend can be observed both within and outside of the EU. The global political constellation has significantly changed, the world economic crisis of 2009 and geopolitical polarization resembling that of the Cold War period being the most illustrative examples. New global actors such as China, India and Turkey have emerged and imposed themselves as economic, geo-strategic or regional powers. In politics, far-right parties and movements have gained strength as they passionately advocate for the return of “traditional values”

embodied in conservatism, nationalism and skepticism. Recent regional conflicts with global implications, such as the one in Syria, have put the EU's capability to act as a real global power to the test. The EU's inability to reach consensus and effectively implement its own decisions on how to address the migration crisis was one of the main reasons for launching the debate on the future of the EU.

Internally, the EU has demonstrated a lack of capacity to function effectively, which is mainly blamed on the new members from 2004 onwards. Whether this is indeed the case or not falls under the realm of an academic debate, however this state of play has largely shaped the enlargement process since the initial enthusiasm of the early 2000s. After the EU came to the conclusion that large mistakes were made with previous enlargements, the European Commission came up with the so-called new approach to accession negotiations to be applied to all candidate countries after Croatia. The new approach basically means that the rule of law becomes the main focus of the accession negotiations and progress in that area or lack thereof determines the overall pace and the dynamics of the negotiations. Furthermore, the fulfillment of all membership criteria is scrutinized in a much stricter and less favorable way for the candidate countries.

The final blow to the enlargement policy came with the migration crisis and Brexit. With these two imminent and by all means important and complex challenges, enlargement descended further down the ladder of EU political priorities. Therefore, the most successful policy since the foundation of the EU and the most effective use of European soft power seems to have lost its appeal. The most recent failure of the EU to agree to opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania makes Euro-enthusiasts in the Western Balkan region wonder which arguments they will use to justify the need to continue the European integration process in their respective countries. It will be difficult and, for the sake of facts, not fair to blame it entirely on the two candidates. How the lack of a positive decision will affect the EU's credibility in the region remains to be seen in the forthcoming period, but it is safe to assume that Euro-skepticism will no longer be exclusively reserved for the citizens of the EU.

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Given the entirety of circumstances, the European integration process of Serbia has been moderately successful. The accession negotiations were opened in the beginning of 2014 and Serbia has so far opened 17 out of 35 negotiating chapters, two of which have been provisionally closed. Under the new approach, the European Commission reports to the member states every six months on progress in the area of the rule of law which significantly influences the decision to open further chapters. In the case of Serbia, the pace of the negotiations is also dependant on the normalization of relations with Pristina – Kosovo and Metohija, Serbia's southern province which unilaterally declared independence in 2008. Serbia, as well as five EU member states, do not recognize the independence of Kosovo and Metohija but it has agreed to participate in the EU facilitated dialogue on the normalization of relations. The outcome of the dialogue, which according to the EU's negotiating framework with Serbia should entail "comprehensive normalization of relations" on the basis of status neutral premise, is meant to contribute to the long term stability of the region. Serbia has so far demonstrated a high level of political and practical commitment to the dialogue by implementing the vast majority of agreements reached with representatives of Pristina under the auspices of the EU.

In early 2018, the European Commission published the Credible Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans where Serbia and Montenegro were acknowledged as frontrunners of the accession process and likely the next two countries to join the EU. The strategy stated 2025 as the possible year for the next enlargement, provided that all membership criteria, with the focus on the reforms in the area of the rule of law, are successfully met. Member states took note of the strategy, however they gave it no clear and unequivocal political support. 2025 caused the most controversy, as it demonstrates a lack of willingness in some of the EU capitals to commit to a concrete outcome of accession negotiations. Although it remains a weak incentive for Serbia and other Western Balkan partners to continue with the European integration process, in reality the strategy was never truly implemented and only serves as a tool for the European Commission's apparatus to come up with new and creative

initiatives to encourage some form of cooperation and partnership with the region.

Popular support for the European integration process in Serbia has been steady at slightly above 50 % over the last couple of years, which is below the region's average. Euro-skepticism is traditionally present in Serbia, although overall support has increased since the opening of accession negotiations, this is in stark contrast to its rapid decline after the historic maximum of around 70 % which was registered immediately after the EU granted Serbia visa liberalization in 2009. In relation to the EU, citizens of Serbia tend to demonstrate rather rational choices, choosing the EU for its living standard, mobility, educational opportunities. On the other hand, they are emotionally bond to countries such as Russia, perceiving it as a genuine friend due to its support of Serbia on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija. The influence of other non-EU actors such as China and Turkey is also ever more present, both in Serbia and in the rest of the region. The inability of the EU to live up to its promises and commitments to Serbia and the region irreversibly creates an open space for different influences making the efforts of other actors quite legitimate.

In contrast to the marginal majority support of membership in the EU, the vast majority of Serbian citizens support reforms in all areas, with an emphasis on economic reforms, fight against corruption, independence of judiciary and reforms of the health and social security system. Such a high level of awareness of the importance of reforms for their own well-being demonstrates the maturity of the population which does not necessarily connect reforms to the membership in the EU. However, on the other hand, it also shows the level of disillusionment amongst the population with the process of European integration which in their opinion is taking too long and promises no concrete outcome. An additional reason for concern is the increasing Euro-skepticism of the youth in contrast to the middle-aged population, who are currently the greatest supporters of EU membership. Millennial youth, accustomed to a fast-paced approach to life in a digital era, is less willing to engage in a comprehensive and a long term process of European integration.

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Serbia's negative image, which prevailed in Western Europe throughout the nineties has made its European path more complex and difficult. In spite of the democratic transformation of Serbia in the early 2000s and its continuous efforts to contribute to the peace and stability of the region which is acknowledged by the EU, Serbia has constantly been put in the position of having to defend itself from the image of the regional troublemaker. Serbia has undoubtedly changed for the better, which does not mean that all criteria for the EU membership have yet been met. A lot still needs to be done in the framework of the reform processes, with an emphasis on the area of the rule of law. In the sense of the complexity of the rule of law reforms and their effects in the mid to long run in terms of implementation, the EU's new approach to accession negotiations has demonstrated a positive impact. However, it needs to remain a strict but fair tool of assessment and judgment of actual reform results instead of an instrument for slowing down or blocking the accession negotiations. Serbia has entered the European integration process with full knowledge of the conditions and complete political willingness to engage in fulfilling the membership criteria and it seeks no shortcuts to the EU. The Serbian government fully supports the merit based approach of the EU for every candidate, as well as the individual progress of the candidates based on reform results. As a serious and a reliable candidate, Serbia expects the dynamics of the accession negotiations to reflect its actual progress.

In spite of the fading enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans, Serbia remains committed to its European path. Simultaneously, Serbia will continue to foster peace and stability in the region together with enhanced regional cooperation which contributes to connectivity, economic cooperation and the mobility of citizens. Serbia's most recent initiative to establish the so-called mini Schengen area with North Macedonia and Albania is aimed at lifting barriers to the freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital between our three countries. At a later stage, such an area might be implemented in the entire Western Balkan region. This initiative represents the implementation of the core EU values, embodied in the four freedoms on the regional level and it emerged as the result of a genuine and authentic awareness within the region that such cooperation is

essentially necessary. Notwithstanding the political differences which undoubtedly exist on a number of issues between Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania. Given the current realities surrounding the enlargement policy of the EU, similar initiatives are likely to follow. They will not be a substitute for full membership in the EU but they represent a rational choice aimed at stronger and more effective cooperation within the region which in the future will have to rely more on its own capacity and resources.

The future of the EU enlargement process is yet to be seen. The EU will have to prove the credibility of its promises to the region and the region will have to find strength and wisdom and continue its efforts on its European path. With all the options presented, there is still no credible alternative to the European integration process. On the other hand, the EU leaders need to consider modalities of addressing Euro-skepticism in their respective countries. Instead of succumbing to the blame game, where new members and candidate countries are the usual suspects for all internal problems of the EU, the leaders need to demonstrate their ability to address citizens' concerns in a functional and effective manner. On their part, candidate countries need to overcome their rightful disappointment with the long running process and frequent lack of reward for their reform results and continue with reforms for the benefit of their own citizens. Hopefully the newly elected and appointed European institutions, though they have already encountered a rough pre-start to their mandate, will demonstrate creativity and enthusiasm for the enlargement process in spite of active attempts to make it reversible. In today's world, the irreversibility of the enlargement process is in the interest of neither the candidate countries nor the EU.

*Denis Preshova*

## **Missing the Carrots? North Macedonia's thorny Path to EU Accession Negotiations**

“The European Union’s transformative power”, has been present as a phrase and notion in the academic and political discourse on the EU for some time.<sup>1</sup> The claim that the EU has been able to transform political systems and societies through its normative power and conditionality represents one of the bases for labeling the EU enlargement policy as the “most successful EU foreign policy”.<sup>2</sup> While this could be convincingly argued in the case of Central and Eastern European countries and their membership in the EU, nowadays it seems that the EU enlargement policy has been the victim of its own “success”. Not only has this success been diluted and relativized in light of the ongoing problems in these countries after their accession, especially lately with the rule of law, but also through the very mixed results of the enlargement policy in Western Balkans (WB). An increasing number of voices have questioned the effect of EU conditionality in the latter case, as these mixed results are becoming more visible on the ground.<sup>3</sup> Besides the internal problems which WB countries have been facing, this is also due to the lack of consensus among the EU member states on enlargement, which

- 1 See: Heather Grabbe, *The EU’s Transformative Power* (Palgrave Macmillan 2006); Tanja A. Börzel, *The transformative power of Europe reloaded: the limits of external Europeanization* (KFG Working Paper Series, 11, 2010), Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, FB Politik- und Sozialwissenschaften, Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft Kolleg-Forschergruppe “The Transformative Power of Europe”, online at: <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/36800>; and Cristophe Hillion, *The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy* (SIEPS 2010:6).
- 2 Cristophe Hillion, *The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy* (SIEPS 2010:6).
- 3 See for instance, Florian Bieber (ed), *EU Conditionality in the Western Balkans* (Routledge 2017); Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil and Marko Kmezić (eds), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

has led to certain disengagement of the EU with the WB and reduced the appeal of integration. Therefore, it could be argued that the (re)nationalization of EU enlargement policy has caused inconsistencies and damaged the EU's credibility in this sense.<sup>4</sup>

The renowned quote from the Thessaloniki EU-Western Balkans summit in 2003, which resonated strongly in the region, that “the future of Balkans is within the European Union”<sup>5</sup>, has lost much of its strength as membership, the “golden carrot”, seems ever more distant. Even though the European perspective for the WB has been made more “credible” by the European Commission in 2018<sup>6</sup>, the messages sent remain rather ambiguous. Absent the “golden carrot”, the EU is losing its leverage and conditionality is noticeably weakened.

The efforts of the EU to maintain the impression of continuous engagement with the region have been perceived as focusing more on stability than democratic consolidation, thus creating justifications for the slow pace or even stalemate in the integration process in the WB. The “stabilocracy” approach has significantly hindered efforts towards accomplishing sustainable reforms in the region. The peak of the migrant crisis is behind us now, while the Brexit saga is reaching its final stages, and the EU still cannot prove it is capable of dealing with more than two or three major issues. This is why it is high time for the EU to demonstrate its true commitment and act as a genuine transformative power in the WB. The EU's leverage and credibility is currently seriously tested, especially in the case of one country, North Macedonia.

North Macedonia was the first country from the WB region to sign the Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2001, even before Croatia. It applied for EU membership already in 2004. In 2005, North Macedonia

4 Cristophe Hillion, *The Creeping Nationalisation of the EU Enlargement Policy* (SIEPS 2010;16).

5 See the Declaration, online at: [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_PRES-03-163\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-03-163_en.htm).

6 European Commission, *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans*, February 6, 2018, online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspectivewestern-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspectivewestern-balkans_en.pdf).

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became a candidate country for EU membership and in 2009 received its first recommendation from the European Commission for the start of accession negotiations. However, just as in the case of NATO membership in 2008,<sup>7</sup> also in the case for accession negotiations with the EU, Greece used its veto to block North Macedonia from entering these processes due to the long-standing name issue. This Greek veto has been a faithful companion of every single recommendation for the start of accession negotiations since, thus for ten years.<sup>8</sup> The citizens of North Macedonia had hoped and expected that the EU and its member states would somehow pressure Greece on the name issue. However, not only did this not occur, but also the vetoes were used by some member states as a cover for their genuine objection for opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia. The disappointment from this stalemate with the EU integration created fertile ground for democratic decline and the re-occurrence of authoritarian tendencies under the rule of a coalition led by populist conservatives in North Macedonia.<sup>9</sup> The obvious presence of such authoritarian tendencies have been finally recognized by the European Commission in its progress report in 2016 declaring a state capture of the institutions and key sectors of society in North Macedonia.<sup>10</sup>

It was also through the engagement of the European Commission in North Macedonia that the political turmoil, which culminated in 2017, was tackled. The new government of North Macedonia has clearly demonstrated its serious commitment to turning a new page, particularly, at the regional level in its relations with neighboring countries. First, an agreement with Bulgaria on good neighborly relations was signed and then a very difficult

7 Bucharest Summit Declaration – Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Bucharest on 3 April 2008, paragraph 20, online at: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm).

8 The recommendations of the European Commission were conditional in 2015 and 2016 due to the political crisis.

9 More general on this in Florian Bieber, Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans, 34 East European Politics, 2018.

10 European Commission, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2016 Report, p. 8, online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key\\_documents/2016/20161109\\_report\\_the\\_former\\_yugoslav\\_republic\\_of\\_macedonia.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_the_former_yugoslav_republic_of_macedonia.pdf).

compromise with Greece was reached through the so-called Prespa agreement<sup>11</sup>, resolving the name issue, which lasted for 25 years. However, the reform efforts of North Macedonia, which make this country perhaps the only bright spot in the region, have not been adequately recognized. As the decision on the start of accession negotiations has been postponed on three occasions, June 2018, June 2019 and October 2019.<sup>12</sup> The “silver carrot”, the entry ticket into the waiting room has still not been granted. Denying a start of negotiations for North Macedonia would send all the wrong signals not only to this country, but also to the whole region.

First, from a regional perspective, the successful resolution of longstanding disputes through difficult compromises in a region in which this has continuously been a great challenge will remain unrewarded. The compromise over the name issue, a truly historic one, has been perceived and frequently referred to as a pattern to be followed in the resolution of other regional disputes. However, this could not be accomplished without the adequate recognition of such efforts and following up on promises made in the process. In this manner, the leverage of the EU in other regional disputes is surely going to be reduced, thus once again allowing other global players, such as the U.S. and Russia, to have the leading role in the EU’s backyard. Namely, the dispute between Kosovo and Serbia as well as the Bosnia and Herzegovina conundrum, arguably the biggest burning issues and security threats in the WB, will not be resolved through this sort of weak conditionality. Without a more serious engagement, the EU’s interest in the region would certainly be undermined. Denying, once again, the start of accession negotiations to Macedonia would represent strong proof thereof.

- 11 Final Agreement for The Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995; and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties, online at: <https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/spogodba-en.pdf>.
- 12 Council of the European Union, General Affairs Council, Council Conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, 26 June 2018, p. 16; and Council of the European Union, General Affairs Council, Council Conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process, 18 June 2019, para. 38. And “European Council conclusions”, 17-18 October 2019, p. 2 para. 5.

## Missing the Carrots? North Macedonia's thorny Path to EU Accession Negotiations

Second, when domestic reforms and the EU's transformative power are concerned, without the "silver carrot" for North Macedonia the EU would not do justice to the region's recent poster child. Namely, North Macedonia has throughout this time kept a high level of support for the EU and the integrative processes; even if it has slightly decreased in the past couple of year.<sup>13</sup> Therefore there has always been an expectation from the governments to bring the country closer to membership. In this sense, the reforms never really totally stopped, with the exception of 2015 and 2016, but only changing pace during the ten years' stalemate in the integration process. With the country's new government, domestic reforms have been once again intensified and this has been noted by the European Commission. As a matter of fact, according to the Commission's most recent progress reports, when it comes to the priority reform areas, also known as fundamentals, North Macedonia stands better than any of the other candidate countries from the WB. It stands even better than Montenegro and Serbia, which started accession negotiations in 2012 and 2014 respectively.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, by ignoring the merits and not awarding accession negotiations the EU will demonstrate the clear existence of double standards, instead of a constructive competition, in the case of WB countries, which would definitely lead to disappointment. North Macedonia has already experienced the grave consequences of an earlier disappointment, thus a negative scenario from such a decision is very much feasible.

The EU stands at an important crossroad of its development, which requires the urgent need of reconfiguring itself amidst ongoing crises. Some member states, such as France, are strongly pushing for reforms of the EU itself. However, by leaving out the WB from the clear path of integrative processes the EU would only create another crisis, which would surely detract it from internal reforms. The EU needs to demonstrate the capacity to deal with

13 Ivan Damjanovski and Marie Jelenka Kirchner, Analysis of public opinion on Macedonia's accession to the European Union (2014-2018), Public Opinion Analysis Paper No. 1/2019, (IDSCS, KAS February 2019).

14 European Stability Initiative, How Are They Doing in 2019? European Commission assessments of Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Albania (May 2019), online at <https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/ESI%20-%20How%20are%20they%20doing%20-%20deciding%20on%20merit%20-%20May%202019.pdf>.

several challenges at the same time. The next enlargement of the EU is almost definitely not going to occur in the mandate of the upcoming Commission and that leaves enough time for reflections and decisions on the future path of the EU. Neither the granting of accession negotiations with North Macedonia means a swift enlargement, nor should it be used as a bargaining chip in internal debates - as the stakes are much higher. After all, the WB stands as a small island on the European continent surrounded by EU member states. Hence, one should speak more of a reunification<sup>15</sup> or completion<sup>16</sup> instead of an enlargement of the EU since the external borders of the Union would not be changed. Completing the EU seems like a priority that should be placed high on the list.

- 15 Remarks by HR/VP Federica Mogherini at the press conference following the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers (Gymnich), 30 August 2019: “I personally believe that the enlargement process, when it comes to the Western Balkans, has two specific elements issues. One is that the enlargement is not in that case a proper enlargement: geographically it is a reunification because all the Western Balkan countries are neighbouring EU Member States, it is an island in-between the European Union. So, it is not an enlargement it is a reunification of the continent”, online at [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/66820/remarks-hrvp-federica-mogherini-press-conference-following-informal-meeting-eu-foreign\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/66820/remarks-hrvp-federica-mogherini-press-conference-following-informal-meeting-eu-foreign_en).
- 16 Remarks by Foreign Minister of North Macedonia Nikola Dimitrov, Helsinki 30 August 2019, online at: <https://mia.mk/2019/08/fm-dimitrov-france-and-the-balkans-are-fighting-for-the-same-values/?lang=en>.

*Flandra Syla*

## **EU Enlargement Agenda toward Western Balkans – The Case of Kosovo**

Across Western Balkans, public sentiment has it that, as a rule of thumb, the EU deals with the region only retroactively and mainly when a crisis emerges. Such sentiments are directly fueled by a track record of constant de-prioritization of enlargement in favor of other, arguably, more pressing issues on the EU end. While it is true that the EU has been in the center of troubling occurrences such as the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis, and finally Brexit, it is arguable that enlargement was so mutually-exclusive with regard to these events that it had to be practically dropped altogether.

In such a context, the enlargement agenda was largely carried out on an ad-hoc basis, lacking a clear-cut vision and a focused strategy, thus leaving the region in a risky limbo. For illustration, there are fifteen years in between the 2018 enlargement strategy and what might be considered a previous event of equivalent magnitude, namely the 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the case of Kosovo specifically, despite undergoing tremendous changes in between these two events – from UN-administered territory to independent country recognized by the majority of the EU member states – progress on the European path has been fairly unimpressive.

Despite the EU's consistency in officially reiterating that Kosovo has a clear European perspective as part of the Western Balkans, tangible progress in the country's accession path has only been scarce. Kosovo's integration agenda is trapped somewhere between the strains emerging from the EU-facilitated dialogue on the normalization of relations with Serbia, the heavy

1 EU-Western Balkans Summit, Thessaloniki, 21 June 2003. Online at: [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_PRES-03-163\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_PRES-03-163_en.htm).

burden of not being recognized by five EU member states, and the country's own multi-facet troubles with nation-building, rule of law, economic reforms, and democratization.

In 2018, in what accounts as the most substantial commitment toward Western Balkans in recent years, the EU laid out a revised strategic approach for the integration of the group of six remaining countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia.

The document, officially entitled “A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans”, hereby referred to as the EU enlargement strategy, gave rise to new hopes that the enlargement fatigue and the consecutive crises that had been hitting the EU from all sides were finally fading in favor of a renewed commitment toward Western Balkans. While it is arguable that what the strategy entails verbally is mirrored by a proportional commitment in terms of implementation, the document includes to considerable positive outcomes, specifically for countries such as Montenegro and Serbia, for which accession timelines are laid out. Rather regrettably, for Kosovo the document lays out not much more than a manual for standstill.

The first significant contractual relationship between Kosovo and the EU, the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA),<sup>2</sup> was signed in 2015 and entered into force in 2016. The signing of this agreement is a historic event in EU-Kosovo relations, not only insofar as it marks the first legally-binding contractual relationship between the two, but also because the SAA offers Kosovo the chance to seize numerous opportunities, which by making the country more compatible to the EU would also fundamentally transform it. Kosovo is offered a ten year framework to meet the reforms and carry out the work prescribed in the document. However, for Kosovans the concerning issue is that even if every criteria is dutifully fulfilled, there are only vague assumptions regarding the epilogue. As far as the SAA is concerned, EU officials admit that the only issue they are open to discuss is its

2 The SAA document signed between Kosovo and the EU. Online at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1476698477996&uri=CELEX%3A22016A0316%2801%29>.

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implementation; projections about how exactly the completion of the SAA would materialize in Kosovo's accession ambition are practically off the table.<sup>3</sup> The EU enlargement strategy on the other hand also fails to bear any tangible projections regarding the plausibility and modalities of the country's accession. The strategy labels Kosovo as a "potential candidate" whose focus should be in the implementation of the SAA, whereas advancements on its European path shall occur once circumstances allow.<sup>4</sup> Under the lines of the overwhelmingly ambiguous EU language lay the real issues: the five non-recognizers, the tensioned and politically unpredictable dialogue with Serbia, and last and – this time – ironically least Kosovo's internal capability to carry the necessary reforms.

In pushing forth such, ambitious agendas, which EU integration is, the prevalence of a sound mix of requirements and incentives is incremental for success in the long run. In the case of Kosovo, where the former currently outweigh the later, the perspectives are not on the upside spectrum. Yes, the obedient and efficient ticking of the criteria box does foremost benefit Kosovo itself, and again yes, seizing the economic, commercial and cultural opportunities that the SAA entails goes also to Kosovo's credit. However, carrying such complex and all-encompassing reforms is a heavy burden for a fragile country with scarce capacities. If this heavy burden is not met by equally high stakes, chances are grim we will speak of progress. Here is what the EU needs to take into account.

First, concerning the group of the five non-recognizers, the EU should not be satisfied by the status-quo of merely restating the obvious that the recognition of independence is a national matter of the specific member states. Instead, there should be a proactive and genuine commitment toward finding middle ground and generating creative solutions. After all, state positions are fluid and subject to change. Exemplary to this is the fact that in

3 Augustin Palokaj and Gjeraqina Tuhina, *The Upshot of the SAA: Kosovo-EU Relations*, 2016, p. 9. Online at: [http://kfos.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MSA-ENG\\_TEXT-2.compressed.pdf](http://kfos.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MSA-ENG_TEXT-2.compressed.pdf).

4 European Commission, *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkan*, 6 February 2018, p.2. Online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf).

a few years' time, four out of the five member states that do not recognize Kosovo have moved on to recognize Kosovo passports.<sup>5</sup> For the global diplomatic player that it ought to be, the EU should be able to gravitate with more confidence into Western Balkans perplexities. For example, if the five non-recognizers remain decided in blocking Kosovo's accession, there is nothing that derails the remaining twenty-three from conditioning Serbia's accession to the Kosovo issue.

Second, the EU possesses many powerful tools which it can leverage, of which primarily the Brussels-facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. To evoke some context, in 2011, after years of frozen relations, Kosovo and Serbia began a "technical dialogue" to normalize them. In 2013, the EU-led dialogue resulted in the first agreement between the two parties. Among others, the document known as the "Brussels Agreement" made Kosovo and Serbia party to a commitment not to "block, or encourage others to block, the other side's progress in the respective EU paths".<sup>6</sup> Under the current light, especially after the publication of the new EU enlargement strategy, the ongoing dialogue embodies renewed significance for the respective European paths of the two countries. Indeed, while Kosovo also seeks to use the dialogue to secure jurisdiction over the entire territory, especially the Serb-majority municipalities of the north, it is fair to say that Serbia is part of the dialogue primarily because of its EU aspirations. Despite the EU officially holding that "Accession is and will remain a merit-based process fully dependent on the objective progress achieved by each country",<sup>7</sup> on the negotiation table, Serbia clearly has a head start in that it is the country that the EU wants to win/ integrate more urgently.

For Kosovo, there is a general lack of clarity and causal relationship between dialogue requirements and advancements in the accession path. Moreover,

5 Cyprus, Greece, Romania and Slovakia recognize passports issued by the Republic of Kosovo despite not recognizing Kosovo as an independent state.

6 First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations – EU press release. Online at: [https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-13-347\\_en.htm](https://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-13-347_en.htm).

7 A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkan, 6 February 2018, p.2. Online at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf).

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despite the dialogue being integrated within the framework for the accession negotiations with Serbia, and into the SAA for Kosovo, the principal burden seems to be on the latter. While for Serbia there is a clear integration pathway, for Kosovo, despite dialogue outcomes and potential fulfilment of SAA criteria, the same is missing. The state of affairs is so that “despite the conditionality of the normalization of relations being common to both Serbia and Kosovo and the Dialogue facing hindrances, Serbia’s prospects keep advancing whereas Kosovo’s remain at a stalemate”.<sup>8</sup> By failing to properly and fully seize the opportunity at hand – namely, a singular conditioning tool applied equally to both parties – the EU is sending the wrong signal and compromising the process in the long run. If Kosovo’s vulnerability deriving out of non-complete recognition is exploited to quell fears of losing Serbia (again) to other, non-Western influences, then, time and again, what ought to be a merit-based process will be jeopardized by geopolitics. The EU must tie the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue to the enlargement strategy in ways that recognize, encourage and reward commitment, openness to compromise, and the capacity to implement and enforce signed agreements, and equally point out and penalize the failure to do so.

Third, in asking Kosovo, or for that matter any other country, to be a reliable partner, the EU must lead by example. There is a general public sentiment that the EU has failed Kosovo. Unfortunately, that is not merely tied to the integration agenda. The EU’s involvement in the nation-building process, most evidently through its law enforcement mission EULEX – the largest ever in EU history – has had a not-so-positive record. Cumulatively, the voice of the EU has started to lose its echo, and Kosovo’s faith in the integration process is trembling. Lucrative economic opportunities aside, why should Kosovo commit to the EU agenda and believe in accession prospects when the track-record, especially related to visa liberalization shows that despite fulfilling all criteria and meeting twice as many conditions

8 Linking the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue to the EU Enlargement Strategy, 2019, p. 14. Online at: <http://www.legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/GLPS-Linking-the-Kosovo-Serbia-Dialogue-to-the-EU-Enlargement-Strategy.pdf>.

as other countries<sup>9</sup> the process was endlessly prolonged. Despite being the most pro-EU of all six Western Balkans countries,<sup>10</sup> Kosovo has been kept isolated the longest and without substantive objective reasoning.

Indeed, this brings us back to the principle of proportionality in mixing requirements with incentives. Instead of customary proclamations of interest in the country, the EU must strictly relate the fulfillment of criteria to specific steps in the accession path. But to do so, a clear accession path needs to be laid out in the first place. Important questions such as what happens when the SAA is completely implemented or what are the practical gains from constructive engagement in the dialogue with Serbia cannot be sidelined for much longer. It is high time that Kosovo not simply be cursorily mentioned in enlargement talks, but also that the country's European perspective is translated into an accession roadmap with precise and measurable steps.

Finally, Kosovo faces manifold internal challenges: rule of law is weak, corruption is high and the economy is in a deadlock. The European integration agenda represents a unique opportunity to advance these matters and boost democratization further. The European presence is heavily felt in all hallmarks of life and Kosovans embody in the EU the authoritative friend with whom their fate is intertwined. For Kosovo, there is no alternative to European integration. That being said, the EU must not regard this as something to take for granted. Nor should it see Kosovo's lack of alternatives at face value. Instead, the EU must deal with Kosovo in good faith and make the case for a reliable, long-standing partnership. Kosovo has a young, dynamic and thriving population whose Euro-enthusiasm is unmatched. The EU must use the enlargement framework to seize and channel this enthusiasm, not dishearten and jeopardize it.

9 Roadmap of Visa Liberalization with Kosovo. Online at: [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/visa\\_liberalisation\\_with\\_kosovo\\_roadmap.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/visa_liberalisation_with_kosovo_roadmap.pdf).

10 Balkan Public Barometer. Online at: <https://www.rcc.int/seeds/results/2/balkan-public-barometer>.

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